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May 24, 2006
For Immediate Release

Virginia Natural Heritage Program Named America's Best

Arlington, Virginia – The Virginia Natural Heritage Program, a part of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, has been named the top natural heritage program in the Western Hemisphere. Virginia's program was singled out for "Outstanding Conservation Impact" among 75 similar natural heritage programs that comprise an international network across the United States, Canada, and Latin America.

NatureServe, the international conservation group that coordinates the network, recognized the Virginia Natural Heritage Program (VANHP) for its exceptional efforts over the past decade to conserve Virginia's native plants, animals and natural habitats. "I am impressed by the commitment of the Virginia Natural Heritage Program's staff to conservation and leadership," said Mary Klein, Acting President for NatureServe. "Virginia's program is recognized around the country as the best in the business, and Tom Smith and his colleagues are national leaders who set an example to be followed."

"Virginia's Natural Heritage Program plays an important role in preserving the rich biodiversity of our Commonwealth," Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine said. "This work also is a great help to local governments, conservation groups, and businesses in protecting significant habitats and landscapes across the state."

"This award is a reflection of the dedication of DCR's Natural Heritage staff," said Tom Smith, Director of the VANHP. "We're extremely proud of the recognition we receive from NatureServe and our partners for our efforts in conserving Virginia's rich natural heritage."

The award recognizes a long list of exceptional achievements, including:

- Development of a comprehensive database of Virginia's rarest plants and animals that guides conservation action and timely land use decisions by federal, state and local agencies and conservation organizations;
- Development of the State Natural Area Preserve System, one of the best state preserve systems in the nation, with 46 preserves spanning 41,000 acres that protect habitat for more than 300 different at-risk plant and animal species and special natural communities;
- Extensive field surveys that in over 20 years have led to the discovery of 23 species new to science and about 200 species never before known in Virginia;

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- Promoting prescribed fire management, invasive species control, and wetland restoration across the Commonwealth;
- Developing the Virginia Conservation Lands Needs Assessment, which uses geographic information systems (GIS) to model and map land conservation priorities and actions in Virginia.

The natural heritage program's work was also acclaimed by the Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources, L. Preston Bryant, Jr. "The Commonwealth of Virginia has among the most historic natural resources in the nation," said Bryant. "From our Chesapeake Bay to our famed Blue Ridge Mountains, ours is truly an environment rich in biodiversity, and our professional staff is single-minded in its mission to protect and promote the natural resources that make Virginia the place people around the world love to visit."

"On behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia, we are very pleased to receive this award from NatureServe. The award recognizes the excellent job our Virginia Natural Heritage Program staff has been doing for many years," said Joseph H. Maroon, Director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. "We appreciate being recognized for leadership efforts that benefit Virginians and can serve to further natural resource protection nationally and internationally."

This is the second time that the VANHP has been selected as outstanding natural heritage program in the Western Hemisphere, having received a similar award in 1994 from The Nature Conservancy. "The Virginia Natural Heritage Program is a valued partner of ours that continues to excel in conserving Virginia's biodiversity," said Michael Lipford, Vice President and Virginia Director at The Nature Conservancy. "We've known it all along, but it's great to see people around the country recognize it as well."

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NatureServe is a non-profit conservation group dedicated to providing the scientific information, technology, and services needed to guide effective conservation action. Representing a network of 75 natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America, NatureServe is a leading source for detailed scientific information about threatened plants, animals, and ecosystems. Visit us online at www.natureserve.org.